

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Matthew 19:30, 20:1-16**  
**“Envy: When The World Turns Green”**  
*(The Seven Deadly Sins Series)*

March 2, 2014  
(Last Sunday After Epiphany)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

MATTHEW 19:30, 20:1-16  
"WHEN THE WORLD TURNS GREEN"

30 **BUT MANY THAT ARE FIRST WILL BE LAST, AND THE LAST FIRST.** God Overturns Our Rankings  
Only In Mt. (M), Intended To Shock All! // Mk. 10:31

**1) vv.1-2 The First Hired For Work.** Kingdom Compared To Whole Story, Not Only Householder

1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a **householder** who went out/ early in the morning/ A Bit Unusual, 6:00AM  
to hire laborers for his vineyard./ //Rabbinic Parable *Midras* Ps. 37

2 After agreeing with the laborers for **a denarius** (i.e. day's wage for labor) a **day**, Work As Privilege, Not A Right  
he sent them into his vineyard. 21:33-46, Is. 5:1-7, Jer. 2:21, 12:10, Hods. 10:1, Israel, Harvest Time  
Owner Does Whatever It Takes To Gather The Harvest

**2) vv.3-7 The Hiring Of Others Up To The Eleventh Hour.** 0/3/6/9/ 11

3 a And going out/ about the third hour/ 9:00AM, 3 Parts: Going/Time/Work  
he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; World Of Chronic Unemployment  
4 and to them he said, Leaves Us With A Question: What Is Right?  
"You go into the vineyard too, and *whatever is right* I will give you." = *what is just*, Assumes A Fraction  
So they went. Unusual Features Accumulate: Landowner Hires Repeatedly  
vv.3-7, Long/Short-Short/Long

5 b Going out again/ about the sixth hour Noon  
b' and the ninth hour, he did the same. 3:00PM, Assumed To Be The Last Hire, But Not So!  
Real Comparison Is 1st/5th Groups = *First/Last* (19:30//20:8//20:16)

6 a' And about **the eleventh hour**,/ Punch Line! Sinners? Gentiles? 5:00PM, 5<sup>th</sup> Group  
he went out/ and found others standing; Owner Is Urgent In His Hiring: Work For Me!  
and he said to them, "Why do you stand here idle all day?"  
7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." Willing But Ignored, 5<sup>th</sup> Group Of Workers  
He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." No Negotiation Of Labor Price, No Promise Made  
Owner Does Whatever Necessary To Gather The Harvest

**3) v.8 Turning Point: Expectations Created, Then Reversed.**

8 And when evening came,/ Poor Expected Pay Each Day, Dt. 24:15, Lev. 19:13  
the owner (*Kyrios* Lord) of the vineyard said to his steward,  
"Call the laborers and pay them their wages, Kingdom Of Justice, Generosity  
**BEGINNING WITH THE LAST UP TO THE FIRST**." Reversal: Creates Dissonance, Expectations  
Reversal: They Now *Come Out* To Him

**2') v.9 The Eleventh Hour Paid (3/6/9 Understood But Omitted For Bold Contrast).**

9 And when those hired about **the eleventh hour** came, Gentile Latecomers Have Same Status As Israel!  
each of them received a denarius. *What is right?* (v.4b), Eph. 2:10, Rom. 9:30-31  
No One Treated Unfairly, Assumes 3/6/9th Also Received A Denarius

**1') vv. 10-15 The First Paid Last.** All Depends On Divine Generosity!

10 Now when the **first** came, God's Justice/Right Are Not According To Human Calculation  
they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received **a denarius** Expectation Created By v.4b  
Not A Parable About Just Employment Practices

11 And on receiving it they grumbled against the **householder**, saying, All But First Group Get More Than Expected!  
12 \* "These **last** worked (made) only one hour, No Address To Owner, Strong Initial Impression Of Injustice  
and you have made them equal to us True! Complaint Of Jewish Christians? 9:9-13, 11:16-19  
\* who have borne the burden of the **day** and the scorching heat." 2 Charges, Expectations Exposed  
God's Kingdom Is Not About Equal Pay For Equal Work

13 But he replied to one of them, Three Questions  
(?1) "*Friend* (Mister!), I am doing you no wrong (injustice); Owner Is Just; Goes Beyond Justice To Generosity  
did you not agree with me for **a denarius**?" 22:12, 26:50 1) Answer: Yes, Shame on you!  
Grace That Is Calculated Or Expected Is Not Longer *Amazing Grace*

14 (?2) Take what belongs to you, and go; Rabbinic// b. Ber. 2.5c, 15 Last Produced As Much As First!  
I choose to give to this **last** Issue = Did I Work For The Master? Reframed As Generosity  
as I gave to **you**. Big Question = What Is Fair? No Injustice, Much Grace

15 Or am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? 2) Answer: Yes  
The Only One Worse Off Is The Owner, Open-Ended Question

(?3) Or do you begrudge my generosity (goodness)? Sir. 14:9-10, *Evil Eye* = Envy, 3) Answer: Yes  
(Lit. *Is your eye evil because I am good?*) 19:17, Offense = Salvation Not A Payoff For Hard Work  
*Evil Eye* = Envy, Mk. 7:20-23, Generosity Beyond Justice, Not Merit

16 **SO THE FIRST WILL BE LAST, AND THE LAST FIRST.** No Reciprocity With God, All Is Grace! KJV 22:14

## A BEGINNING ANALYSIS OF THE DEADLY SIN OF *ENVY*

CATEGORY	ENVY
<b>Bodily Location</b>	Minds's Eye, The Imagination, The <i>Evil Eye</i>
<b>Synonyms</b>	Jealousy, Coveting, Latin <i>invidia</i>
<b>Brief Definition</b>	Painful awareness of another's good which is resented and aspired to
<b>T.V. Mnemonic: <i>Gilligan's Island</i></b>	Mary Anne was always envious of Ginger!
<b>*Corruption Of Something Good, parasitic on...</b> <b>*Life as....</b> .....	Joy in the goods & accomplishments of another person Life as comparison, to always rank the self and never be content
<b>Healing Virtue</b> .....	Kindness towards others, Taking my own life seriously
<b>Blessed are...</b> .....	"Those who mourn," Mt. 5:4
<b>One word: <i>A</i></b> .....	<u>A</u> ppreciate & <u>A</u> dmire the goods/gifts of others as well as your own
<b>*Healing Discipline</b> .....	Thanksgiving as part of worship, immersion in the Body of Christ
<b>Desire for...</b>	Something not mine, of another
<b>*Stereotype</b>	The Wanna-Be
<b>Impairs a...</b>	Sense of blessing and a blindness to the provision of God
<b>Biblical example</b>	Tower of Babel, "make a name for ourselves"
<b>Commandments</b>	No. 10: Not to covet a neighbors goods or relationships
<b>Effect on others</b>	Isolation, Self-loathing
<b>Key verses</b>	Rom. 1:29, Gal. 5:21, 26; Titus 3:3, Phil. 1:15, 1 Tim. 6:4, 1 Pt. 2:1
<b>*You become...</b> .....	Externally focused on what you cannot control
<b>*Loss</b> .....	Contentment, Peace, Joy in God's current provision
<b>*"M" word</b>	MAYBE
<b>*Hell is...</b>	What you are/own as never right and never enough
<b>*Leads to...</b>	Rivalry, Hostility, Conspiracy, Delight in pain of the other, Gossip
<b>*Household item</b>	Television and its advertising which creates false needs based on envy
<b>*Theme song</b>	Alanis Morissette: "You Oughta Know"
<b>Emerges as a new layer of 8 stages (E. Erickson)</b> <b>Focuses On..</b> .....	4) School age, noticing what others have! Socialization, Learning how others live
<b>How Dante's Punishment fits the vice</b>	Eyelids wired and stitched shut so you cannot see to envy
<b>Social mapping of deadly sins in Nevada</b>	Most number of thefts: robbery, burglary, larceny, stolen cars
<b>*Institutional form</b> .....	Most advertising,
<b>Cultural &amp; Political Form</b> .....	Class warfare politics
<b>*Personal Evidence</b>	Always comparing your deficiencies with other's excellencies
<b>*Excuse</b>	"I deserve more," "I'm not envious; I just want what's mine!"
<b>Secular Form</b>	Vicious Competition, Status-seeking

## WHEN THE WORLD TURNS GREEN

*“Or, are you envious because I am generous?”*

Jesus unveils the ugly hearts of his hearers.

M A T T H E W 2 0 : 1 5 b

**I**n 1994 at age 23 Solange Magnano was crowned Miss Argentina. She parlayed her title into a successful modeling career, even founding her own agency. With great care she maintained her career and appearance for more than a decade, but by 2009 both were showing signs of age. That November Solange travelled to Buenos Aires to undergo *gluteoplasty*, an operation that uses implants to produce a firmer posterior and so resist the sagging effects of gravity upon fatty tissue. During the procedure she developed a pulmonary embolism and died. At 38 she left behind a husband, twin 8-year-old boys, and lots of raw material for bad jokes.

"Solange had everything," a friend lamented. "She lived the life of a goddess; she was the *envy of everybody*. Now she's dead because she wanted a firmer behind."<sup>1</sup> Envy took her life, but not envy in the normal sense of wanting what another has, but the flip side. Hers was the delight of the one *who was envied*, and it had to be maintained; she had to be envied. A little lift cost her a long life, and she became *the butt* of much tasteless humor. Envy or envied: both can be deadly.

But it's not a new story; it's as old as fairy tales. At the beginning of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the page of an ornate book reveals a wicked queen who daily consults her magic mirror, "Magic mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?" As long as the mirror names the queen, Snow White is safe.

The wicked queen lives in a large castle atop a mountain. The magic mirror hangs in a dark tower, and as the queen approaches, she summons the specter. A fiery inferno billows within the mirror and gives way to a ghostly face. Expecting the same answer as always, she inquires, "Magic mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?"

The mirror responds, "Vain is your beauty, Majesty. But, oh, a lovely maid I

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<sup>1</sup> [www.dailymail.co.uk](http://www.dailymail.co.uk) (12-02-09).

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see. Rags cannot hide her gentle grace. Alas, she is more fair than thee."

The queen's face contorts; her eyes burn with hatred. Though she is beautiful and a queen besides, her envy of Snow White- a scullery maid- consumes her. She commands a huntsman to take Snow White to the woods and kill her, returning only with her heart, but to no avail. She then tries a poison apple. Ultimately, the queen perishes while fleeing the scene of the crime. She is destroyed by the deadly sin of envy.<sup>2</sup> The queen envied a young beauty and Solange the gluteus maximus of her younger self, and it killed them both. Both employed violence, the Queen against Snow White, the model against herself. Envy and jealousy are twins, aren't they? Envy wishes to gain what it does not have, jealousy to keep what it has and fears to lose, and both are symptoms of a deeply diseased soul.

When we are green with envy, we are ripe for trouble. One green with envy will soon blacken their own eye. Envy is a cruel game of comparison in which the one who initiates the game always loses. Envy is the boomerang of the seven deadly sins; we aim it at another, but it flies back against us with uncanny accuracy and deadly effect. In its most malignant form, envy does not care what price it pays so long as the other is afflicted. Like pride, it is a sin of the soul and not of the body, though it leads invariably to emotional and bodily illnesses.<sup>3</sup> The proud and the despondent share a common factor; neither has an accurate picture of the self before God: one too high, the other too low, and both are prone to envy. Envy is the only one of the seven deadly sins that offers the sinner no pleasure at all. Lust and gluttony deliver short term pacification to out-of-control appetites, but from its inception envy causes nothing but pain and sorrow within the citadel of the self. It is a self-inflicted wound that breeds gangrene. Peter Kreeft writes:

"Thus envy shows more clearly than other sins two profound truths about the nature of all sin: it removes our joy and is deceptive. The

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<sup>2</sup> PreachingToday.com search under *envy*.

<sup>3</sup> For treatment of envy in philosophy, literature, poetry, myth, modern therapy and theology, see Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapter 3, "Envy," 55-82; also on envy William Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2005), 49-62; Rebecca Konyrkyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 41-58; Ed Young, *7 Fatal Distractions* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2000), 49-72; Jeff Cook, *Seven: The Deadly Sins And The Beatitudes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

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Devil- who whispers his seductive advertisements in our ears- is a liar. His road leads to pure misery, not satisfaction, much less to the joy we are deep down, seeking.’<sup>4</sup>

There is a Jewish folk tale of two merchants who owned shops across the street from each another. If one got a customer, he would smile in triumph at his rival. They were bitter enemies. One night an angel appeared to one in a dream, "I will give you anything you ask, but whatever you receive, your competitor will receive twice as much. You can be very rich, but he will be twice as wealthy. Do you wish a long and healthy life? But his will be longer and healthier. What is your desire?"

The man frowned, thought for a moment, then said, "Strike me blind in one eye!"<sup>5</sup> That is envy become malice; envy and its ugly offspring are everywhere.

I do not envy the successful athlete or politician; they are not in my field of comparison. I am tempted to envy the fifty year old pastor with a Ph.D., a five thousand member church, many books published, and more anointing from God and hair than I have! Those are the seminars I avoid going to. The one you envy reveals your character. Not the ones you admire; that’s aspiration, which is not sin. To recognize excellence is not envy, but to take it as a judgment on your worth is envy. Who do you envy? It’s a clue to what you truly value.

To covet is to violate the tenth commandment which forbids that we desire the things of others. But merely desiring is not yet envy in the full sense, only the first step. Envy is when we cannot rejoice in the good fortune of another but take it as a statement of our own inferiority. Simply put, "Envy hates the other for having something good."<sup>6</sup> Envy is deadly because- if nursed into the green dragon it may become- it leads to slander, gossip, even direct action to harm the other. The 1994 Nancy Kerrigan and Tanya Harding fiasco shows what a cruel thing envy is. Harding hired a thug to break Kerrigan’s leg because she was the better skater.

Envy is no doubt the meanest of the seven, and next to pride perhaps the hardest to acknowledge. We hear of someone else's good fortune, and it causes a pain in our heart. We force a smile, "It couldn't happen to a nicer person." But inwardly

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<sup>4</sup> *Back to Virtue* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1992), 122.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

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we feel the green venom injected into our hearts. Outwardly a smile, inwardly a scowl. Envy hides behind insincerity till it can plot revenge or take secret glee in the downfall of the one envied.

In a rare fit of self-examination, I once listed as many effects of envy as I could think of. See if you agree:

Envy is the enemy of contentment. It compares my weaknesses with another's strengths- which is always a losing proposition.

Envy robs peace and joy from the present. Envy is hooked on *If only*....

Envy blinds me to my own blessings and gifts. It steals life from the present.

Envy smothers gratitude which is the seed bed of true joy.

Envy reveals a lack of proper self-love.

Envy is non-productive; it changes nothing; it's a poor substitute for real change.

Envy eventually links my happiness with another's misfortune; it's cruel.

Envy makes love and respect impossible. You can neither respect nor love someone you envy. Envy kills community; it isolates one by one.

Envy is an indicator- like fever for the body- that something is wrong with the soul, that vice is sending down deeper roots than virtue.

Envy is not minor. It's a deadly sin. It blocks the love of God because it's never content; it saps love of neighbor because everyone's a competitor.

A little thought reveals that envy is always linked with inferiority of some kind. C.S. Lewis pointed out that no one who says "I'm as good as you" ever believed it. "It is the word of one who feels inferior and resents it."<sup>7</sup>

It was the psychologist Erik Erikson who in the early 1950's alerted us that the fourth of the eight human developmental stages was *Industry vs. Inferiority*. This is the stage of school aged children prior to adolescence, roughly ages 6 through 12. The virtue to be acquired during this period is *competence*, the ability to manipulate tools and resources to accomplish individual and group goals. Smaller children are content to play, but older children take great pride in actually doing something. They win recognition by producing things. But when trying, inevitably you fail. You also notice that others do the same tasks better and with greater skill. You compare yourself with your peers, and so arise feelings of inferiority. Some are smarter or

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 124.

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stronger or cooler or better looking or come from more advantaged homes; we all know this. Inferiority grounded in comparison is the soil in which envy takes seed and grows. Feelings of inferiority are often so painful we desire to remove the source of the offense and mistake it for the other person. It is during the early years of school that the vice of envy first takes serious root, and all our days we battle it.

If life is good by God's design, including the whole developmental cycle, but also radically fallen, then we should expect a new vice to rear its head at each of the markers as new human capacities emerge along the way: gluttony in infancy, anger in early childhood, greed for the play years, envy for school age years; pride for adolescence, lust for young adulthood, apathy or sloth for middle adulthood, melancholy or despair for older adulthood.<sup>8</sup> It takes a lifetime to know the full effects of our common fall and to see the complex layering and inner deceptions of our sinful nature. So when your child comes home sullen, "I hate Susie. She got a new red bike," they're right on schedule! It's time to teach them about the deadly sin of envy and the healing virtues of gratitude and contentment and genuine aspiration and self-discipline. It's time to re-teach the old gospel song, "Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done."

You see, envy is not about other people; *envy's about me*. It is not the same as the desire to emulate another; that is positive modeling. It is not to be confused with legitimate ambition, the desire to achieve what others now enjoy. Envy is not the green of a thing growing towards health; it is the putrid green of a thing gone rotten and moldy. To see envy in your child, or to discover it again in the child within yourself, is a wake up call from God. Envy will make you miserable, and if you are miserable, envy may be the diagnosis.<sup>9</sup> And as with all sin, there is only one path to wholeness: name it for the ugly thing it is, receive God's forgiveness through Christ, welcome the monitoring of the Holy Spirit, study your foe in Scripture, and take up the battle for your mind and heart in cooperation with God.

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<sup>8</sup> For the correlation of Erikson and the seven deadly sins, see Donald Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987), 21-45; also his *The Depleted Self* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1993), 47. For a review of relevant psychological literature, see Richard H. Smith and Sung Hee Kim, "Comprehending Envy," *Psychological Bulletin* 2007, Vol. 33, No. 1, 46-64 (internet PDF).

<sup>9</sup> See Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, 63-64 for a ten point program to combat envy. Each of the ten is a good starting point to resist the insanity of envy and repent!

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It would be wrong to tell you that envy is a major topic in the New Testament; it is not. It's one among others in the standard lists of vices.<sup>10</sup> But that does not mean it's unimportant, if for no other reason than the damage it does. It can destroy a friendship and on an international level lead to war. Sadaam Hussein envied the Kuwaitis their oil and resented their riches. Result? Tens of thousands died, plumes of oily smoke blotted out the sun and poisoned the ground; US soldiers were killed, all because of one man's envy. Envy causes pain, and when coupled with political might, its power is horrific. Envy is a private sin with public effects.

Jesus once told a sophisticated story about envy. It's typically titled *The Laborers in the Vineyard*, though one recent scholar renames it *The Good Employer*.<sup>11</sup> I don't like either; it's really all about expectations created and disappointed; perhaps we should name it *The Envious Workers*. Jesus used it to expose a deadly vice in his hardest working disciples and to demonstrate how different are the values of God's kingdom where perfect justice and surprising generosity are seamlessly joined.

We are warned in the beginning this is not a business story and not an agriculture story. This is a grape harvest used as a vehicle to speak about the rule and reign of God, God's kingdom, the new government Jesus arrives to announce and how counter it is to the way things are now run. Verse 1, "For *the kingdom of God is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*" We know from the Hebrew prophets that the vineyard is a symbol for the people of God, for Israel.<sup>12</sup> God's kingdom and God's people are the agenda, not grapes and wine and day laborers and minimum wages. This is theology in story form, using the

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<sup>10</sup> Mark 7:22, Romans 1:29, I Peter 2:1, Galatians 5:21, 26.

<sup>11</sup> For analysis of the parable, see Pheme Perkins, *Hearing The Parables of Jesus* (Ramsay, NJ: Paulist, 1981), 137-146; Bernard Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1989), 281-300; Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1990), 221-225; Daniel Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1991), 282-285; David Garland, *Reading Matthew* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1993), 197-206; Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 30-45; 284; Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 373-375; Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 362-378; Charles Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 238-239; Mary Kay Dobrovolny, "Who Controls the Resources?" [www.sbl-site.org/PDF/Dobrovolny\\_Matthew.pdf](http://www.sbl-site.org/PDF/Dobrovolny_Matthew.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 5:1-7.

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well-known as a window into the strange new world of God's dealings.

It's harvest time. Vines are ripe and workers needed from the pool of the chronically unemployed who stand at the street corner. Slaves often had it better than such day-laborers. What was earned they and their families ate that day- which is why payday was each evening, not just once a week. It was subsistence living at the edge of survival. With the first batch there is an explicit verbal contract: sunup to sundown for a single silver coin- a denarius, the expected wage for a day's work. A nod from each, and they begin picking. But more are needed, so again at 9:00am the master hires more, only this time no amount is specified, only the promise to be fair, "...and whatever is right I will give you." They join the others, expecting to receive a fraction, likely seventy-five percent. Again at noon and 3:00 in the afternoon. They think fifty percent for half a day and twenty-five percent for a quarter. The math is easy- and besides, they need to eat. They are not lazy. Unless someone hires them, there's no work, and they have no land of their own. It's not a welfare story.

Well, there's a problem here, so we may as well admit it. Why didn't the vineyard owner hire all he needed at first light? Doesn't he know how many man-hours it takes to do this all in one day? Of course, but that would ruin the story, which for its punch line depends on five hires, and the last only an hour before closing time so we get the desired contrast between *the first* and *the last*. And to get *the first* and *the last* you also have to include *the in between* or it doesn't flow properly. Also, in the logic of the kingdom, the harvest is not static. New workers are always needed. While the harvest is being gathered, the harvest continues to grow and ripen. Such is God's agriculture. Fields have boundaries, but not this kingdom. The time from planting to harvest can be very short in some lives- almost instantaneous, and in others take years. Also, the vineyard is expanding as the church opens up new fields and cultivates new peoples. New workers are always needed, and the primary reward is not what you get at the end of the day but the privilege of working in the Lord's vineyard. Some rewards are internal to the work.

There's a pattern. Every three hours since 6:00am a new group is hired. Since the day ends at 6:00pm, there's not time to hire another group if the three hour cycle is the norm. Which brings us to our first surprise. At the eleventh hour, that's 5:00pm, when the day is nearly spent, a last group is hired. Idle all day, now employed for a single hour. "You go into the vineyard too," said the householder. Our owner is persistent, and if he has a need will take anyone, even the weak and the old and those hardly ever chosen- say the girl who never went to the prom and the boy never chosen for the baseball team. In this work, there's room for all.

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It's at the center of the story, in verse 8, that a second surprise comes. The harvesters are to be paid not in the order hired but in reverse. Again we hear the owner's voice, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning *with the last up to the first.*" Then the third surprise- the most puzzling of all, "And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius."

What a shock! The mental math suddenly changes, "If they- who worked only one hour- got a full denarius, then we should get twelve; it's only fair! What a great boss! Wait till momma hears about this!" The workers hired at 9am, noon, and 3pm are ignored. They're part of the scenery, not the plot. The focus is the contrast between the last and the first. By now you know the whole story is a setup to expose the hearts and expectations of the first workers. Jesus is sneaky. Verses 10 through 12 are the breakthrough:

"Now when the time came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. On receiving it *they grumbled against the householder*, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'"

In the morning they're happy to work for a day's wage, but in the evening full of envy and anger, not because they didn't get what was promised, but because others got more than was expected. That's envy isn't it? Sorrow at the good fortune of others, the desire that they get less or you get more to keep all things in balance and the rankings straight. The kingdom of God comes to disturb all such calculations.

Remember our warning at the beginning? This parable is not about ancient agriculture or labor relations law but the new logic and laws of God's kingdom where mercy and generosity are the standards, not the calculating *fairness* where each gets his due and no more. When we get what we deserve, it's *the justice of God's righteous judgment*- and no one in their right mind wants that. When we don't get what we deserve, it's *God's mercy* creating a new space for our response. And when we get what we don't deserve, it's *grace*- a big bonus, and grace is the operational logic and offensive power of the kingdom of God. And we will either begrudge it or rejoice in it as the dynamic energy of God's new world come to rearrange all our old ways of thinking. Living by the new logic and with an abundance mentality is the antidote for invidious comparisons and the pain-filled calculations of envy which leave me locked up in a prison of self rather than loving this amazing God and those around me. I learn to rejoice in all the surpluses God gives others because I trust the

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God of the kingdom to provide what I need as well. My worth is grounded in God, not in what you have that I don't, or what you are that I'm not.

The owner replies to their attacks with three questions, each more probing than the last. To the chief complainer he said, "Friend," or as we might say, "*Mister*, I'm doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?"

The answer to which is "Yes, you did, but that was twelve hours ago before you pulled this silly prank to take advantage of us! We want our fair share, not in terms of what you promised but in comparison with them." Envy.

Whatever else we may think of the owner, he's not unjust; he keeps his public promises. And whatever else Jesus may have taught about his Father's kingdom, this much is plain: the God of justice is a promise keeper. We often don't do what we promise; God always does. Justice is one of the minimum qualifications to be God. A capricious God is not worthy of the name or of our worship. Justice and righteousness and fidelity are attributes of God. God has inward and outward integrity. God's ways sometimes remain a mystery to us, but God's character and actions are one. As our Methodist doctrine teaches, "He (God) is infinite in power, wisdom, *justice*, goodness and love, and rules with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of (all) men, to the glory of his name."<sup>13</sup>

The second question is preceded by the owner pulling rank, verse 14: "Take what belongs to you and go; I *choose* to give to this last as I gave to you. Or am I not allowed to do what I *choose* with what belongs to me?" In other words, "If you can't swallow my generosity, then leave my presence." Envy has awful power, especially if you prefer it over the new realities which will one day be all there is.

God is not outwardly but only inwardly constrained by the divine character God's actions are not arbitrary, but God has freedom to choose and options we do not. Our greatest comfort is not that we have chosen Christ, but that God in Christ has first chosen the whole human family to be the recipients of his grace by taking on human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and identifying in this life with all of us. In the incarnation grace is offered to all, but only accepted by some- and that is the terrible mystery of our ongoing cooperation with sin and evil. Why refuse the only medicine that heals? Every one of you are chosen in Jesus Christ; now what will you do with

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<sup>13</sup> Extracted from "The Confession of Faith: Article I- God," The Book of Discipline 2012, 75.

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that fact? Just as the owner has authority over his vineyard, so the Lord does what he wills with what belongs to him, and this particular God- the God of Israel and of Jesus, has chosen to embrace us in the flesh of his only Son, which gives us the possibility of a new future in the kingdom that is already on the way to bring this world under probing judgment and eventually total transformation..

But it is the third question that cuts most deeply and reveals most thoroughly, “Or do you begrudge my generosity?” or more literally, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” The answer to which, at least for those first hired, is “Yes, we are envious, because you are nuts!” You don’t play by the rules we live by.

One of the things theologians argue about is which of all God’s multiple attributes is closest to the center of the divine heart.<sup>14</sup> What is the *reigning attribute* around which all the others are organized, if we may speak this way? If the one God is- as the church teaches- an eternal and ever-lively self-giving between the Father, Son, and Spirit so that they are constituted as the one God by their relationships, then is there a characteristic or quality that drives us into the very heart of God’s mystery? Where may we rest our faith?

If it is the answer to the first question, that God is *just*, then we are not in good shape at all, because we have all been born in sin, have each added to the burden of this world, and cannot free ourselves because we are both guilty and in bondage. And if the power of God’s freedom to choose - what we call *divine election* - is at the center, then we are really no better off. An argument can be made that God would be perfectly just in not choosing any of us. But if the third question is the decisive clue- as I think Jesus intended, then divine generosity as shown in goodness and mercy is the center of the circle of who God is and how God acts towards us. For John Wesley it was *holy love*.<sup>15</sup> The Spanish writer Cervantes put it this way, “Among the attributes of God, although they are all equal, mercy shines with even more brilliancy than justice.” Or as John Chrysostom said in fourth century Constantinople, “Mercy

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<sup>14</sup> See Colin Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> See Ken Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2007) for a defense of holy love as the axial theme of Wesley’s practical divinity.

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imitates God and disappoints Satan?”<sup>16</sup>

God is not less than just, and no one has freedom like God. No one can get outside or inside leverage on God, but beyond all these God is holy love and loves mercy. And if you are offended by this, that sinners can be saved after a life of dissipation and sit right alongside those of us who have perhaps been in the fields a bit longer, and if you see mercy and kindness and generosity as weaknesses, then you mark yourself as more a citizen of this world than of the coming kingdom. And if God’s mercy has not made you merciful, there’s a disconnect. Jesus told some highly offensive stories, and they may have all sorts of implications for labor relations and affirmative action and unions and living wages and access to capital, but that is not what this story is about, at least not on the surface. It’s not about the improvement of this world but the announcement that a new world is on the way and that it operates by a different code of conduct, so be prepared to be shaken wherever it happens to break in! You will never get what you most desire by telling God what he owes you. Instead, throw yourself down on God’s mercy and generosity; stake your claim at the foot of the cross of the man who told us this story. Then stand up and receive your orders for how you are to bear witness to this coming kingdom, one of which is through social critique and social ministry and social action. It is a good question to ask how the coming kingdom critiques current arrangements.

This is what Jesus the teacher does in his parables. He lays us bare. The Christian life is not about looking good; it is about Jesus peeling the onion, exposing the deeper layers of sin and calling me to accept the healing medicine of grace for my sickness unto death.

If we harbor secret questions about why the thief on the cross was promised Paradise, or if we think the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son was right, or if we feel a twinge of resentment when some sinner gets right with God late in life, or if we think that because we have served faithfully we will receive more than those who came later on, then we are no different than these workers who grumbled. We show that we do not yet appreciate the upside down logic of the kingdom of God. We are guilty of envy. This parable is about the disturbing and amazing grace of a God who does not calculate according to our rules. This parable is a CT scan for envy, and the question is, What just showed up on your screen?

There is only one cure, and that is not to hide it, though it is a shameful

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<sup>16</sup> James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1988), 346.

**Matthew 19:30, 20:1-16 . . . . . 15**

disgusting sin, but to confess it, first to yourself (I feel envy), then perhaps to a confidant (I am struggling with envy), then to turn from it to something better in the power of forgiveness. We will never fully get rid of it; the capacity was built into us early on if Erikson is right. It is a layered thing and may rear its head at any time. As one of the seven deadly sins, it's rooted deep within and will not be finally removed till we die and receive new resurrection bodies beyond the powers of sin and death and evil. Only a constant appreciation of God's kindness can keep it in check.

Two cows grazing in a green pasture saw a milk truck pass. On the side of the truck were these words, "Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, Vitamin A added." One cow sighed, "Makes you feel sort of inadequate, doesn't it?"<sup>17</sup>

Don't go there. It's not the truth. Green, rotten, slimy, putrid envy it is a dirty, low-down, soul-corrupting, love-destroying, misery-creating, joy-sucking, fellowship-destroying, loneliness-creating deadly sin about which Jesus warned us in perhaps his most difficult parable. Root it out, dig it up, poison it with gratitude, and always, always, as Barney Fife taught us, *nip it in the bud*. To bring it home, consider the testimony of Robert De Moor:

"...when the apples ripened, Mom would sit all seven of us down, Dad included, with pans and paring knives until the mountain of fruit was reduced to neat rows of canning jars. She never bothered keeping track of how many we did, though the younger ones proved more a nuisance than a help: cut fingers, squabbles, apple core fights. When the job was done, the reward for everyone was the same: the largest chocolate-dipped cone money could buy. A stickler might argue it wasn't quite fair since the older ones actually peeled apples, but I can't remember any complaints. A family understands it operates under a different set of norms than a courtroom. Once, when the store ran out of ice cream and my younger brother had to make do with a Popsicle, we felt sorry for him despite his lack of productivity (he'd eaten the apples he'd peeled that day- both of them). God wants all his children to enjoy the fullness of eternal life. No true child of God wants it any other way."<sup>18</sup>

This is why Jesus told the stories he did. And that's all there is to say.

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<sup>17</sup> PreachingToday.com search under *envy*.

<sup>18</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 20:1-16.

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